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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from the 3rd year of a 4-year study of the impact of educational reform on at-risk students in Texas. Specifically, the study examined the effect of four reforms on at-risk students--the attendance policy, the no pass/no play rule, the driver's license law, and the TEAMS/TAAS (Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills/Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) exit-level examination. Methodology involved three components: a longitudinal study of 9th- and 10th-grade at-risk students in 50 school districts; a case study of 8 high schools; and a statewide survey of all high school principals, which elicited an 81 percent return rate. Findings suggest that the four policies do not increase academic achievement or graduation rates, which are the two purposes for implementing the reforms. First, the policies fail to touch many of the students defined as at risk using TEA criteria; and second, they do not influence many unidentified at-risk students who experienced difficulties. Specific policies are perceived to have little impact on regular students, but are viewed as having a neutral or negative impact on at-risk students. Effective policy implementation must take local variability into account, be ongoing, utilize locally existing networks, and promote cooperation among all levels. General policy recommendations are included at the end of the report. (LMI)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ED359641

IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM ON STUDENTS IN AT-RISK SITUATIONS

PHASE III

INTERIM REPORT

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An Interim Report on a Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on Students in At-Risk Situations in Texas

Phase III Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by the Texas Education Agency's Division of Policy Planning and Evaluation in an effort to provide preliminary information about the impact of educational reform on at-risk students in Texas.

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Preliminary recommendations in this report are based upon data collected for the study, discussions with program staff within the Texas Education Agency, and input from participating school districts.

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An Interim Report on a Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on Students in At-Risk Situations in Texas

Preface

Many efforts are underway, both in Texas and nationally, to search for and implement effective strategies to promote excellence and equity and to increase student achievement in the current high school education system. Attention is being focused on students who may appear to be less able and/or less willing to take on and perform competently in the student role. Common to this attempt are a wide range of programs that involve notions of "restructuring," "alternative education," and "reform." The Texas educational reform movement was initiated in 1983, when the Legislature, State Board of Education, and the Texas Education Agency introduced a standardized curriculum and a variety of other changes into the educational system.

One caveat is necessary: It must be understood, that terms such as "regular students" and "at-risk students" reflect vocabulary conventions used by the staff participating in this study, and are employed in this report. Use of such descriptors is in no way purported to communicate a belief that students described as "at-risk" are in any way "deficient" individuals; nor is such usage intended to mitigate responsibility towards all students. Alternate phrasing ("under-served," "slow-learners," etc.) can be equally as controversial, and/or so unconventional as to run the risk of further confusing an already complex set of issues and phenomena. The reader is reminded that this report attempts to go beyond the terms employed and focus instead on the issues associated with their usage and definiton.

A central theme to this study is a sense of urgency in understanding the consequences of the past decade's reform movement on Texas high school students as a whole, and more specifically on at-risk students. This study assesses the attendance policy, the no pass/no play rule, the driver's license law, and the TEAMS/TAAS examination, and proposes to gain a better understanding of how the term "at-risk" is defined and applied in the schools. The four-year study is comprised of three components: a statewide principal survey, a case study, and a longitudinal sample of at-risk students.

A report summarizing the first two years' worth of findings and recommendations was published in January, 1991, and is available from the Agency's Publication Distribution Office (*Preliminary Findings: A Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on At-Risk Students in Texas*, TEA No. GEI 543 01). Following is a brief synopsis of the past major findings.

BEING "AT-RISK"

•Significant numbers of students are dropping out of school who are not previously being identified as at-risk: They do not meet the formal state criteria, but evidently have personal/educational needs that are not being effectively addressed.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

•The attendance policy was believed to have made some students more responsible for attending class.
•The attendance policy was perceived as having improved parental involvement.
•Implementation of the attendance policy resulted in a burdensome and problematic increase in paperwork.
•Ninth-grade at-risk students were most likely to lose course credit as a result of the attendance policy.

TEAMS/TAAS EXAMINATION

•The TEAMS provided a basis for diagnosis and remediation for at-risk students.
•Counselors reported that ninth-grade at-risk students were more likely to become frustrated by failing TEAMS and drop out, than were eleventh-grade students.
•By itself, the exit-level examination was not the reason students gave for leaving school. Rather, it was in combination with being over-age, behind in course credits, and unable to participate in school-related activities, in addition to the lack of options for "catching up," that the effect was reported to be felt by at-risk students.

NO PASS/NO PLAY

•Students and staff expressed positive attitudes toward the no pass/no play rule.
•Implementation of the no pass/no play rule resulted in some coaches being more involved in athletes' academic work and coordination between coaches and teachers was thought to have improved.
•Almost half (44%) of the at-risk students in the longitudinal sample reported that they had been denied the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities during the 1989-90 school year because of the rule.
•Being unable to participate in extracurricular activities was perceived by staff and faculty to be a factor contributing to students' dropping out of school.
•Based upon interviews with teachers, students who participated in extracurricular activities were working harder in their classes in order to remain eligible.
•The consensus among students, faculty, and staff was that the penalty period should be reduced from six weeks to three weeks with an additional three-week probationary period.

DRIVER'S LICENSE LAW

•Little information was available about implementation of the law.
•One-half of the students reported being unaware of the law.

The first two years of the study revealed that while the policies have had a positive impact on some students, the higher standards being imposed are having detrimental effects for some students. The reforms may also have resulted in the *creation* of a new population of at-risk students due to the unintended consequences of the policies.

This report highlights findings from the *third* year of the evaluation study. It verifies and updates earlier findings, and uses these to generate both policy-specific and broad interim recommendations. These recommendations will be further studied and refined during the remainder of the evaluation.

Overall, the three study components point to a strong differential impact of the reforms upon at-risk and regular students. Responses to general questions about the reforms were predominantly positive, yet specific policies were perceived to have little impact on regular students. Principals perceived that specific policies *decreased* the probability of school completion for at-risk students. Also, there is to date no evidence from any of the study components that either an increase in student performance, or an increase in the graduation rate, has occurred since implementation of the reforms.

Though school professionals seem to endorse the reform movement overall, several changes were suggested to enhance the effectiveness of these policies. The common themes among the suggestions include: 1) adjusting specific aspects of each policy to accommodate local variability, particularly by incorporating greater flexibility, and increasing local decision-making capacity; 2) refining the at-risk identification process to maximize efficient use of limited educational resources and reduce the differential impact of the reforms on groups of students, thus ensuring that the education of *each student* is adequately and appropriately supported; and, 3) weaving concepts of youth development (developmentally appropriate practices) into all areas of the educational policy-making process. This process needs to be linked to an integrated community effort involving business, health, social and other community organizations.

An attempt is made to bring forward the opinions and recommendations of the school staff and students who participated in this study. This attempt, in combination with specific findings obtained through the study and an exploration of current theories and effective practices, have given form to the recommendations. They are not necessarily specific or concrete, action-oriented solutions, but rather they identify and reflect critical issues. The attempt is to foster integrated (between the State, school staff, students, community, and researchers) creative thinking regarding these reforms to produce an effective means of correcting their negative unanticipated consequences and, given limited education resources, tailor reform efforts to better serve *every* Texas student.

An Interim Report on a Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on Students in At-Risk Situations in Texas

Phase III Evaluation Report

INTRODUCTION

There is a need to understand (a) how local interpretations of "at-riskness" vary, (b) how those variations may influence accuracy of identification, and (c) how the proportion of students so identified, on any given campus, may relate to the school's ability to respond effectively to the students' needs.

This report presents findings from the third year of a four-year study of the impact of educational reform on at-risk students in Texas. A report summarizing the findings from 1988-89 and 1989-90, together with preliminary recommendations, was published in January, 1991 (*Preliminary Findings: A Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on At-Risk Students in Texas*). That preliminary report is available from the Texas Education Agency's Publication Distribution Office (TEA No. GEI 543 01).

For purposes of this study the terms "at-risk" and "regular" were selected, although alternative terminology is available in the literature ("under-served," "slow learners," etc.). Any choice of terms is controversial because it singles out the student's situation versus integrating a holistic perspective which includes viewing the educational system as "at-risk" as well. At the risk of perpetuating this problem, this report attempts to go beyond the terms by focusing instead on the issues associated with their usage and definition.

The study includes three components. The first component is a longitudinal study of identified at-risk high school students who participated in extracurricular activities. Data were, and continue to be, collected regarding the impact of four reform policies on this sample of students (the attendance policy, the no pass/no play rule, the TEAMS/TAAS examination, and the driver's license law). The second component of the evaluation consists of a case study. Interviews are held each year with campus principals, at-risk coordinators, counselors, teachers, and students in participating schools. Structured school questionnaires are used to obtain data about each school and the effects of these four policies on both identified at-risk and regular students. This component is scheduled to continue through the 1992-93 school year. The third component consisted of the distribution of a statewide survey to all high school principals in the fall of 1990. Data were collected regarding opinions about the perceived impact of the four selected reform policies on both identified at-risk and regular students. Information pertaining to the change in the allocation of resources since the implementation of the education reforms, including implementation and maintenance of programs and services for at-risk students and the distribution of responsibility for at-risk youth, was also obtained.

A central theme to this study is the urgency in understanding the consequences of reform on Texas high school students as a whole, and more specifically on at-risk students. There is also a need to continue to foster effective reform, and/or school restructuring that is predicated upon research-based programs and practices. The lack of information regarding the impact of certain laws and policies has prevented an adequate assessment of the impact of specific reforms. This study addresses such an information need. In combination, the three study components provide detailed information regarding opinions about reform, implementation issues surrounding reform, and the distinctive impact of educational reform on at-risk students in Texas. The study proposes directions for future research and recommended actions for improvement.

Historical Background on Educational Reform in Texas

Statewide educational reform began in Texas in 1983 when the Legislature, State Board of Education (Board), and the Texas Education Agency (Agency) introduced a standardized curriculum and a variety of other changes into the educational system.

House Bill 246, enacted in January, 1984, resulted in the statewide curriculum. Title 19, Chapter 75 of the Texas Administrative Code, changed the daily planning of every subject and grade level. Essential elements were to be taught by every teacher and learned by every student in Texas schools (Lutz, 1986). Among the

changes mandated by House Bill 72 in 1984 were increased graduation requirements, passage of an exit-level competency test for graduation, the no pass/no play rule, and the five-day absence rule. This wave of educational reform continued during the 71st Legislature with the addition in 1989 of the driver's license bill and a modification of the attendance policy.

During the Texas educational reform movement, one approach to raising standards for all students was to increase graduation requirements. In 1984, based on legislation passed in 1981, the Board approved graduation requirements which included four years of English, two and one-half years of social studies, three years of mathematics, two years of science, and one and one-half years each of health and economics (Chance, 1986). A more rigorous grading system and the implementation of a statewide curriculum, identifying essential elements to be learned by all students, accompanied the increase in graduation requirements.

Although House Bill 72 created the five-day absence rule in 1989, the 71st legislature repealed this attendance policy. In its place (and still in effect) is Senate Bill 417, Section 2.12. This law requires students to attend class at least 80 days during a semester to receive course credit. Each district is required to appoint at least one attendance committee to hear petitions for course credit from students who have less than 80 days of attendance. These committees can grant credit to petitioning students, who in turn can appeal unfavorable committee decisions to the local school board. The law also directs local school boards to adopt policies that establish alternatives for students to recoup credit lost due to absences, and to develop guidelines based on State Board rules that define extenuating circumstances (TEC Section §21.041, 19 TAC §61.65). Finally, Senate Bill 417 (Section 6.05) raised the compulsory school attendance age from 16 to 17 years.

Texas statute resulting from House Bill 72 requires that students take basic skills tests at certain grade levels, and that they pass an exit-level examination for graduation. Competency tests of minimum skills in reading, writing, and mathematics were to be given in the third, fifth, seventh, and ninth grades (before the 1989-90 school year students were tested in the first grade as well). The exit-level examination was limited to mathematics and English language arts until the beginning of the 1990-91 school year, when the student testing program changed from the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills test (TEAMS) to the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Now, the TAAS testing program includes assessment of higher order thinking skills, as well as an evaluation of student writing skills at the exit level (TEC 21.553, 19 TAC §101.2). By the 1994-95 school year, tests in science and social studies will have been phased into the TAAS criterion-referenced test program.

The no pass/no play rule (TEC §21.920, 19 TAC §97.113 (d)-(m)) appears to be one of the more controversial policies in the Texas educational reform movement. It requires students to pass every course during a six-week grading period in order to participate in any extracurricular activity during the following six-week grading period. However, the rule permits the campus principal to waive the suspension for a student who fails a recognized honors or advanced class.

House Bill 850 (71st Texas Legislature, Regular Session) requires anyone under 18 either to have a high school diploma or its equivalent, or to be currently enrolled in either a high school program or equivalency examination program and to have been enrolled for at least 80 days in a high school program or at least 45 days in a high school equivalency program, prior to the issuance of a driver's license (TEA, 1989).

Strategically the four reforms were aimed at improving the overall performance of the student population by raising academic standards. However, the implementation of these policies may be having both positive and negative consequences for at-risk youth. As noted by McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1985:9), "The positive consequences of raising standards for students in American schools can derive only from the greater effort and attention that students might devote to school work in order to achieve than those previously demanded." The question of concern is, do state-level reform policies (like the ones being targeted by this study) result in greater student effort and higher student achievement and, consequently, higher graduation rates? At a deeper level, how do state policies change and affect local level policy, practice, and outcomes?

Need for the Study

Implementation of education reforms in Texas has not been evaluated using a statewide perspective; neither have the definition and usage of the term "at-risk" been examined. Until reforms such as the attendance policy, the no pass/no play rule, the driver's license law and the TEAMS/TAAS exit-level examination requirement have been evaluated, their impact on both regular and at-risk students is indeterminate. Given: (1) the time, effort, and cost associated with implementation of state-level reforms; (2) the unexplored relationship between policy formation and local educational interpretations, practices, and outcomes; and, (3) the potential for both positive and negative human consequences once such policies are implemented, evaluation of the reforms and their intended and unintended effects upon the academic achievement and social engagement of at-risk students in the Texas public school system becomes of critical importance. Furthermore, a programmatic evaluation provides an avenue whereby education reforms can be refined, examined, fine-tuned, and customized to better serve *all* students in Texas.

Description of The Study

The evaluation consists of three components: 1) a longitudinal study of ninth- and tenth-grade at-risk students in 50 school districts served by Education Service Centers in Regions IV and XX; 2) a case study of eight high schools; and, 3) a statewide survey of high school principals to assess their perceptions of the effects of the four selected policies. Results and preliminary findings of the first two years were presented to the State Board of Education in January, 1991.

Triangulation was the research approach adopted for this study. That is, a combination of methods was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the reforms (Patton, 1980:108). This research approach builds on an appreciation of social, structural, cultural, and individual factors in everyday life, with particular sensitivity to how youth development is applied in schools, at home, and in the community. Ethnographic methods and cultural perspectives lead to searching for non-formal policies, understandings, and meanings of "at-risk" as used by students, staff, faculty, and school administrators. These orientations and perspectives are gathered through the use of data collection methods such as interviews conducted with faculty and staff from participating high schools. They provide answers to questions such as what do faculty, staff, and students consider to be the most important consequences of the implementation of these policies, what is it like to be a student or staff member in a high school implementing the policies, and what are the perceived "facts"

Study of the Impact of Educational Reform on At-Risk Students in Texas

	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93
Longitudinal Study (1,800 ninth- and tenth-grade students)					
Counselor Questionnaire	X	X	X	X	
Student Questionnaire		X	X	X	
Case Study (8 high schools)					
Campus-level Data		X	X	X	X
Staff, Faculty and Student Interviews					
Principal Survey Statewide High School Survey		X			

about at-risk students. In combination with quantitative data from the longitudinal study and the case study, this research approach led to findings and understandings that would not have been possible through the use of any single methodology.

Longitudinal Component

Year I (1988-89) of the four-year longitudinal study consisted of collecting detailed data from the school counselor for each of the ninth- or tenth-grade students in the sample. Information was collected regarding attendance, test scores, enrollment in regular or non-college bound (e.g. Correlated Language Arts, Fundamentals of Mathematics) courses, and other detailed descriptive information. Districts were reimbursed $10.00 for each answer sheet collected, verified, and returned to the Agency.

In Year II (1989-90), information from school records for 1,800 students was again obtained from counselors. The study design called for the counselors to distribute a questionnaire to 1,800 students in the sample. An overall response rate of 65 percent was obtained from the students. This overall low response rate was a function of two factors: first, not all counselors distributed the instrument to students; second, some students chose not to respond.

The same approach was utilized in Year III. Counselors provided information on approximately 1,600 students. The reduction in sample size from 1,800 to 1,600 from Year II to Year III is attributed mainly to students who either graduated, dropped out, or moved to another district outside of the selected districts. As in Year II, the study design called for the counselors to distribute a questionnaire. Again, an overall response rate of 65 percent was obtained from the students. The final data collection effort for the longitudinal component of the study will take place during the spring of 1992.

Case Study Component

From the high schools participating in the longitudinal component of the study, eight were selected for a case study. Site visits were made to each of the schools by evaluation staff during the spring of 1990, and again in 1991. Interviews were conducted with the campus principal, the at-risk coordinator, a counselor, and a teacher in each school. A structured group interview was conducted with two classes of eleventh-grade students in each high school. In addition, a campus data collection instrument was used to obtain information about the school and the effects of each policy on both identified at-risk students and regular students. For example, items inquired about the number of students losing credit because of attendance rules, and the number of students ineligible to participate in extracurricular activities because of the no pass/no play rule. Districts were paid anywhere from $500 to $1000 each year (depending upon the enrollment of the campus) to partially remunerate staff for the extensive amount of time needed to collect, verify, and return these data to the Agency. This component of the study is scheduled to continue through the 1992-93 school year.

Principal Survey Component

A survey was distributed to over 1,200 high school principals in the fall of 1990. Perceptions of the consequences of the policies on both identified at-risk learners and regular learners were obtained. Eighty-one percent of the high school principals statewide responded to the survey.

FINDINGS

USAGE AND DEFINITION OF THE TERM "AT-RISK"

Alternatives to Social Promotion (19 TAC§ 75.195) requires that students in grade 7-12 who are below the age of 21 years and who meet certain criteria shall be identified as at-risk. These criteria involve: (1) having been retained, (2) being below grade level, (3) not mastering the TAAS, (4) being homeless, (5) optional psycho-social variables, and (6) residing in a residential placement facility.

In order to assess the impact of reform on at-risk students, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of how the term "at-risk" is defined at the state and local level and how this definition interacts with identification practices at the campus and classroom level. Defining this process is critical in understanding the differential impact of reform on at-risk students.

The second year of interviews with district and campus staff substantiated the findings from the first year of site visits in the case study schools: There are at least two conceptualizations of "at-risk." The formal definition of being at-risk is primarily based on academic performance and uses indicators such as the TAAS, grade point average, and/or being retained. Many schools add psycho-social variables to this list. In addition to the formal definition of at-risk, counselors and teachers report a second informal definition of at-risk that includes a wide range of characteristics and behaviors (lack of parental support, alternative family living arrangements, etc.). In general, though, to those professionals who work closely with at-risk students and are in the position of having to identify at-risk students, they are simply "ordinary kids." Rather than serving as a way to distinguish a *group* of students, the concept of "at-risk" becomes inextricably linked to *individuals*, their context and persona. The common language in the schools was to "individualize," see each as a person. The staff identify students who "don't care," who are not doing their school work, or who are not serious about learning—for whatever reasons. School professionals are also aware of students (usually not identified by either state or local at-risk criteria) who move into and out of risk status due to a personal/family crisis (i.e., divorce, illness, family violence, etc.).

Those who have to apply the formal, policy-based definition of at-risk, find direct conflict with their working concept of at-risk given their tendency to define the problem on an individual basis. The state-mandated definition contributes to a general sense of lack of discretionary control on the part of staff dealing with the students, who feel that they have a "practical grasp" of the problem in contrast to the "theoretical (inflexible, removed) grasp" they perceive in the policies.

One purpose of identifying students as "at-risk" is to better allocate resources to meet students' needs in learning, presumably to prevent them from dropping out. This study continues to reveal that many students leave school who were never identified as at-risk prior to having dropped out. There was no formal signal to indicate a need for reassessing educational programs and/or services. Four of the seven schools in the case study component reported that approximately of the students who dropped of school during the 1989-90 school year were identified as at-risk prior to having dropped out of school. This finding was also reported by the case study schools during the first year of the study. It is possible that many of the students who were only informally identified by school professionals were those students who dropped out.

Counselors in the longitudinal component were asked about whether individual students in the sample were likely not to complete high school. As of the third year of the study, 30 percent of the students who counselors agreed would "not likely graduate" were reported as dropouts. Data from this component also indicate that a large percentage of dropouts did not receive **any**

support services prior to having dropped out. Counselors were unable to provide information regarding services provided for approximately 50 percent of the students who dropped out in 1989 and 1990. Of the remaining 50 percent of the students who dropped out, counselors reported that 65 percent had **not** received any support services prior to having dropped out. Of importance is the utility of the term "at-risk" in *directing* resources to students, which remains open to question in this study, since so many students whose educational needs evidently were not being met (they did drop out) were never "flagged" as having such needs.

The complexity involved in the definition and usage of the term "at-risk," as well as in the process of identifying and exiting students from "risk" status, became evident in the early stage of this evaluation study. Two issues are evident from the three years of findings. The first is an admonition that the term at-risk, when applied in an educational context, must **not** be viewed as a technical term (in contrast to its origins as a technical term). Its predictive power and accuracy in identifying potential dropouts (influenced by many conditions and variables) is a relative rather than absolute condition. Individual variability is a reality, and thus local flexibility becomes a necessity. In the words of several participants (editorial note: Districts are allowed to remove a student from the "at-risk" list; in practice, very few of the schools in this study appear to exercise this option):

> Our teachers are up in arms about it. Our counselors are because they feel we know better than this one test score (TAAS) but we have been told by TEA that the kid stays on the at-risk list. There's no flexibility there...
>
> Let's say the student took the test in the 9th grade, and will be at-risk until the 11th grade when they take the test again. This is ridiculous...
>
> The teachers are mad at me because they think I am the one who is forcing them to keep the kids on the at-risk list and TEA is going strictly by this law. Really, we should have the flexibility if the teachers and counselors believe that this child can use a little extra help in writing, but why do we have to put him on the at-risk list...

The second issue is the notion that the term "at-risk" continues to be used to *focus on the student to the exclusion of the education system.* Under this scenario, the reader, or the policy-maker is invited to think about child-saving and crisis-oriented services, more than about system-changing. Principals, administrators, and educators are in a constant flux of adaptation to social changes affecting the household, the community, the school, and the larger socioeconomic structure. Interviewees were sensitive to perceived social changes and to the inability of the public school setting to adapt to "new" social needs. In this sense, the school, and <u>not</u> the student, is identified as at-risk in it's inability to meet "new" societal demands.

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Continue to analyze the concept of "at-risk," its definition and usage, until its predictive accuracy is improved sufficiently for the term to be useful in appropriately directing limited education resources. The concept needs to be recast in terms of youth development, respectful of and sensitive to the needs of adolescents.**
- **Explore the possibility of using the state-mandated identification criteria of at-risk students as a *recommended* list, so that they will be *useful* to districts in effectively directing resources and services to students. This would enable districts to identify and serve students according to *local* socio-economic and cultural needs.**
- **Provide increased technical support and training to instill flexibility and ensure effective identification and exiting practices. As such it is advisable to use language which helps focus attention on students' <u>situations</u>, rather than on them as individuals.**

Increased Graduation Requirements

In 1984, based on legislation passed in 1981, the Board approved increased graduation requirements that included four units of English, two and one-half units of social studies, three units of mathematics, two units of science, one-half unit each of health and economics, one and one-half units of physical education, and seven units of electives. A more rigorous grading system and the implementation of a statewide curriculum identifying essential elements to be learned was also included.

Findings

Principal Survey Component

• A large majority (71%) of the principals surveyed believed that the increased graduation requirements have had **no impact** on the probability of *regular* students' graduating from high school.

• About half (49%) of the principals answering the survey felt that *at-risk* students have been **negatively** affected by increased graduation requirements, i.e., they are unable to pass regular courses or are transferred into Correlated Language Arts or Fundamentals of Math courses which do not adequately prepare them to master the TAAS examination. Only 13 percent perceived that the reforms have increased the chances of these students obtaining a high school diploma.

Longitudinal Component

• Among students in the sample, neither achievement test scores, rate of earning course credits, nor grade point averages have improved over time.

• Fifty-two percent of the students in the sample did **not** earn enough credits to advance to the next grade level in the 1989-90 school year. This percentage dropped to 19 percent for the 1990-91 school year.

Case Study Component

• Interview data from the case study component suggest that increased graduation requirements have **not served** to engage or motivate at-risk students. School professionals reported that, in many cases, more stringent requirements have served to push the already marginal students even further away from graduation.

Preliminary Recommendations

¤ **Provide all students with high quality, effective instructional and support programs before high school, so that they can be adequately prepared to engage in high school level coursework. Continue such efforts throughout the high school program, particularly in view of the elimination of below-grade level courses.**

¤ **Increasing academic expectations and raising standards of student performance must be planned in conjunction with additional services (i.e., tutorials, more counselors, day care, transportation, health services, smaller class size, etc.) and support systems that will assist in meeting the original objective. Raising standards at the state level will not, in and of itself, improve student achievement at the local school level.**

¤ **Promote effective school restructuring efforts, so that schools will have the flexibility imperative to meeting individual learning needs and increasing student interest via innovative methods and course sequence.**

The No Pass/No Play Rule

The no pass/no play rule (TEC §21.920, 19TAC §97.113 (d)-(m)) requires students to pass every course during a six-week grading period in order to participate in any extracurricular activity during the following six-week grading period. The rule permits the campus principal to waive the suspension for a student who fails a recognized honors or advanced class.

Findings

Principal Survey Component

- A majority (57%) of principals reported that the reforms have **not** reduced *regular* students' extracurricular participation.
- Principals perceived the reforms as having the **reverse** effect on *at-risk* students than on *regular* students. Half of the respondents agreed that the reforms have **reduced** *at-risk* students' participation in extracurricular activities.
- The majority (60%) of respondents perceived the no pass/no play rule as having **no impact** on the probability of regular students' graduating from high school. A small percentage (15%) felt the rule has decreased the chances for regular students graduating and about one quarter (24%) reported the rule has increased the likelihood of regular students graduating from high school.
- Forty percent of the principals believed the no pass/no play rule has **decreased** the likelihood that *at-risk* students will graduate from high school, although a similar percentage of respondents felt the rule has **not** affected the probability of graduation for at-risk students.

Preliminary Recommendations

¤ **Because the no pass/no play rule is perceived to have differential effects upon at-risk and regular students, it must be subject to further scrutiny and refinement. Policy should enhance the opportunity to affiliate with school, to give a chance to students to become part of the school and the community.**

Longitudinal Component

- Eighty percent of students in the sample participated in extracurricular activities at one time or another since the 1988-89 school year. Approximately 40 percent of the students lost eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities (41 percent during the 1988-89 school year, 40 percent during the 1989-90 school year, and 37 percent during the 1990-91 school year).
- Of those students in the sample who lost eligibility during the 1990-91 school year, approximately 52 percent reported that they had lost eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities for **one** six-week grading period; 37 percent lost eligibility for two to four grading periods, and the remaining 11 percent of the students lost eligibility for five or more six-week grading periods.
- Of those students losing eligibility to participate each year of the study, about half (51%) reported that they were able to resume participation once eligibility was restored.
- No difference was observed between the percentage of students who lost eligibility to participate in athletics versus music/fine arts. A smaller percentage of students in science and foreign language-related activities lost eligibility compared to students participating in athletics or music/fine arts.

Case Study Component

- Interviews with campus administrators revealed a potential connection between the no pass/no play rule and gang recruitment. Many students' major involvement with school (its source of personal meaning) comes from extracurricular activities. When this bond is broken, there may be a greater likelihood of being recruited into a gang.

Attendance Policy

Senate Bill 417, Section 2.12, requires students to attend class at least 80 days during a semester to receive course credit and directs each district to appoint at least one attendance committee to hear petitions for course credit from students with less than 80 days of attendance. The law also directs local school boards to adopt policies that establish alternatives for students to recoup credit lost to absences and to develop guidelines, based on Board rules, that define extenuating circumstances (TEC Section 21.041, 19 TAC §61.65).

Findings

Principal Survey Component

• Approximately one-third (36%) perceived that the attendance policy has **increased** the likelihood of *regular* students' graduating, and less than ten percent believed the policy has decreased that likelihood. A majority of the principals (57%) believed the attendance policy has not changed the probability of *regular* students' graduating from high school.

• Thirty-five percent of the respondents believed that the attendance policy has increased the probability of *at-risk* students' completing school, 27 percent believed the policy has decreased the probability of high school completion by *at-risk* students, and 38 percent were neutral.

Longitudinal Component

• Approximately 14 percent of students in the longitudinal sample lost credit due to the attendance policy during the 1990-91 school year. This percentage represents a slight increase from the first year of the study (10%) when the "five-day absence" rule was in effect.

• Fifty-five percent of the students, who reported losing credit for a course due to the attendance policy, petitioned the attendance committee for credit. Of these, 46 percent said they were granted credit.

• The four most common reasons reported by students for missing school were:

- "Didn't feel like going to school" (22%)
- "Went somewhere with my family" (20%)
- "Had to take care of family or friend, other than my child" (13%)
- "Got bored with school" (11%)

Case Study Component

• Interview data indicate that students who are already "tuned out" and alienated, with family and/or work responsibility and with dysfunctional family lives, were reported as being the most affected by the attendance policy. Even with "excused absences," these students may be absent enough to not master a subject.

• Since last year, interviewees observed an emergent pattern where the attendance policy increases the possibility of course failure for some students. Failure in a course early in a course sequence precludes taking the course until the following year, where most students in such a situation give up and leave, either temporarily or permanently. Awareness of this pattern exists and counselors, teachers and principals actively try to prevent it. Interviewees pointed out that the major obstacles to their preventing this were (1) excessively high student to counselor ratios (500:1 or more, sometimes) and (2) the increase of paperwork, which was seen as unproductive and discouraging.

Preliminary Recommendations

¤ **Districts should develop flexible and locally appropriate means of recovering credit for students who have not attended school for 80 days. Emphasis should be placed on *learning outcomes* and on recuperating *work* as opposed to making up the time lost.**

¤ **Opportunities for students to recoup credits lost due to absences should include the option of credit by examination, such as end of year exams and other alternative assessment strategies.**

¤ **The Agency should develop a plan that would assist students who have to work full time (or 20 or more hours per week).**

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TEAMS/TAAS Exit-Level Examination

House Bill 72 requires students to take basic skills tests at every other grade level and requires passage of an exit-level examination for graduation. At the beginning of the 1990-91 school year, the student testing program was changed from the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimal Skills (TEAMS) to the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) (TEC 21.553, 19 TAC §101.2), which includes assessment of higher-order thinking skills. By the 1994-95 school year, tests in science and social studies are scheduled to have been phased into the TAAS criterion-referenced testing program.

Findings

Principal Survey Component

- Approximately 16 percent of principals felt the exit-level examination has decreased the probability of regular students' graduating from high school, while the majority of principals (66%) felt that the TEAMS exit-level examination has had **no impact** on increasing the likelihood of graduation for regular students.

- The majority (55%) of principals reported that the TEAMS exit-level examination has **decreased** the probability of at-risk students' completing high school, and 32 percent felt that the exit-level examination has produced **no change** in the probability of at-risk students' graduating from high school.

Longitudinal Component

- Counselors' perceptions in the longitudinal data indicate that many more dropouts, percentage-wise or in terms of raw numbers, were thought to have left due to poor grades rather than poor TEAMS/TAAS performance.

- No apparent difference was observed in TEAMS/TAAS scores between dropouts and students still enrolled (9th grade TEAMS/TAAS performance was not a good predictor for dropping out).

- Students whose counselors said they met only one or two risk factors, that were believed to affect the probability of their graduating from high school, were significantly more likely to pass the 11th grade TAAS than were students whose counselors said that 3 or more risk factors affected them (61% versus 36%).

Case Study Component

- Interviewees expressed a general perception that the TAAS was "more of the same," another standardized test that often determines the "risk" status of students and serves to distract attention from instructional and learning objectives.

- Interviewees called for multiple assessment. Many felt that neither multiple choice nor true/false standardized examinations serve to measure effective educational attainment, because too much emphasis is placed on passing the test *per se*, rather than on quality learning and instruction. For instance, one administrator said...

> I don't think the kids have a problem with it as much as I have a problem with it. My problem is why do we have to be compared to everybody else in the world for what we do with our TAAS? Why the hell is the test so much the standard for performance...
>
> It's unfortunate we can't paper stamp people out on the computer and that's what they want us to do and that's my problem with it.
>
> And, I know that is only one measure of succ[illegible] measure of failure.

Preliminary Recommendations

- **Because most principals believe the examination to be far more harmful to entering ninth-grade at-risk students, intervention practices should take place *prior* to students' entrance into high school.**

- **Educational and social needs of entering ninth-grade students, particularly those who are known to be working below grade level, must be recognized and effectively addressed upon entering the high school system by using flexible, creative approaches designed to ensure their success.**

- **It is recommended that future policy initiatives which have real student-level consequences (e.g., eligibility to receive a diploma) be implemented on a long-range time frame which provides for state and local level institutional accountability—as evidenced through the Academic Excellence Indicator System and the performance-based accreditation process—*prior* to holding students accountable for achieving selected outcomes.**

- **Districts are encouraged to explore: (a) implementation of learning strategies courses for at-risk students, as these have been used successfully with college undergraduate students; (b) promotion of community-based, parental, and private business involvement; and (c) implementation of in-school GED programs for students in critical situations and/or for those who already have dropped out.**

Driver's License Law

House Bill 850 (71st legislature) requires anyone under 18 either to have a high school diploma or its equivalent, or to be currently enrolled in either a high school program and to have been enrolled for at least 80 days in a high school program or at least 45 days in a high school equivalency program, prior to the issuance of a driver's license.

Findings

Principal Survey Component

• The majority (67%) of the principals responding perceived the driver's license law as **not** having changed the likelihood of *regular* students completing high school. Thirty-two percent reported that the law has increased the likelihood of their completing high school.

• Over half (58%) of the principals responding perceived that the driver's license law has **not** changed the probability of a*t-risk* students' completing high school, while about 38 percent believed that the law has increased the probability of at-risk students completing high school. Only five percent believed the law will decrease the probability of *at-risk* students graduating from high school.

Longitudinal Component

• Seventy percent of the students in the sample were aware of the driver's license law in Year III (1990-91) of the study. Only 52 percent had been aware in Year II (1989-90).

Case Study Component

• Many of the professionals interviewed felt that this law was essentially ineffective.

> I don't know what happened to that. We've had no information whether it is working or not...
>
> I don't think it stops kids from driving...and I think a lot of kids drive without a license.

• All three years of this study have shown this law to be largely ineffective, that is, to have brought about no improvement in the likelihood of students graduating from high school. What is at stake is the potential for creating a general sense of disrespect for the law. If youth see a law (or rule or practice) as "dumb," they are less likely to follow it and, possibly, more likely to question the "validity" of all laws regulating their (and others') behavior. Put at-risk is the idea of the law and, by extension, adult authority (Baizerman, 1991).

Preliminary Recommendation

▫ Consider rescinding the statutory requirement. Findings from this study provide evidence that this requirement has not had any impact on reducing the dropout rate.

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SUMMARY

Do the policies work?

The reforms have consequences for students, faculty, staff and administrators in how each does their everyday life at school (and to some extent, outside in the community). The more relevant question is: do the four policies contribute to the education (and development) of youth at-risk in school (as students) and of students at-risk as youth in the community? The tentative, interim answer is no, on two counts. First, these reforms do not touch many of the students defined as at-risk using TEA criteria; and second, these reforms do not influence many of the students who are seen by school professionals as "really" at-risk (e.g., the population which criteria were not able to target, yet who experienced difficulties in attaining graduation or eventually dropped out).

Overall, the three components of the study point to a strong differential impact of the policies on identified at-risk and regular students, sometimes exacerbating such differences by the introduction of new demands on the student population without appropriate support. Although responses to general questions about reform are predominantly positive, **specific** policies are perceived to have little impact on *regular* students. However, responses about the impact of specific policies on the probability of graduation tend to be neutral or negative for identified *at-risk* students. The principals' survey revealed that specific policies decreased the probability of school completion for *at-risk* students, while the majority (60% or more) of the principals responded that the policies had not changed the probability of regular students' completing high school.

Specific Policy Discussion

Increased Graduation Requirements

The increased graduation requirements were reported to have negative effects on graduation rates. Despite an apparent overall statewide trend towards declining dropout rates, in this study neither student achievement nor grade point averages have improved over time. These new requirements have apparently not served to engage or internalize a sense of motivation in at-risk students. More requirements have apparently further marginalized at-risk students.

No Pass, No Play

The no pass/no play rule was perceived as decreasing at-risk students' participation in school-related activities, an important potential avenue of further disenfranchisement for these students. No differences were observed between the percentage of students who lost eligibility to participate in athletics compared to students participating in music/fine arts. Furthermore, disaffiliation to school was pointed out as a risk factor with a potential link to gang recruitment for a specific group of students.

Attendance

Only about one third of principals believed that the attendance policy increased the probability of at-risk students' completing high school. The four most common reasons students gave for not attending school had to do with being bored, and/or not wanting to attend school, and family-related responsibilities. This policy has not uniformly fostered engagement in school, and thus it is not providing an across-the-board incentive for higher performance. This law was perceived as having most affected students who already had a heavy load of personal responsibilities by exacerbating their "risk" status. In addition, school professionals perceived that the increase in work due to the attendance committees shifted their focus away from more constructive efforts.

TEAMS & TAAS

No major difference was observed in TEAMS/TAAS scores between dropouts and students still enrolled. Interviews revealed that school professionals are seeking multiple assessment. There seems to be consensus in the notion that too much emphasis has been placed on the TAAS examination, to the exclusion of quality teaching and learning.

Driver's License Law

Only a small minority of principals reported that this law contributed to a decrease in the likelihood of high school completion. The notion that this law was essentially ineffective was prevalent in the school professionals' interviews.

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Percent of Principals Indicating that Reforms Resulted in Decreasing the Probability of Students Completing School

	At-Risk Students	Regular Students
Attendance reform	27%	8%
Graduation requirements	48%	10%
Driver's license law	5%	2%
TEAMS exit-level examination	55%	16%
No pass/no play rule	40%	16%

Variability in both the definition and implementation of the reforms was observed. These reforms influence everyday school life, yet they do not seem to enhance the likelihood that at-risk students will be more motivated to do well in school and then graduate. One possible exception is the attendance policy, which has the potential to be useful to the at-risk student if it is used diagnostically, not punitively, **and** is linked to supportive (and if necessary, remedial) services in the school or in the community. The TAAS also touches those thought to be at-risk to school failure, and it too, may best be used to direct appropriate and effective services to *all* students.

Two specific purposes for implementing the four policies discussed in this report were to increase student performance and to increase the graduation rate. There is no evidence from any of the components of this study, that this has occurred. Over time, there should be measurable increases in these two areas if the policies are having the intended effects

Policy Implications

The Texas education reforms, as well as the nationwide educational improvement effort, reflects a perceived need for social structural change. A sense of crisis pervades the perception that not only our youth are at-risk, but the nation itself. How the educational system is responding to the changing needs and new demands of society today is a crucial policy issue. Research shows that it is extremely difficult for policy to change practice at the local level. The relationship between policy and local-level behavior is multidimensional and dynamic in nature. It is the local school district and campus interpretation and implementation of policy that defines outcome. Local level change is a product of local level factors, many times beyond the control of state-mandated policies. The challenge is that local factors fluctuate over time, creating a dynamic decision-making setting. Well-intended laws do not necessarily work well when translated at the local school setting.

Implications for educational policy—reforms aimed at specific elements of the education system—are tremendous. The dominance of local variability added to the dynamic nature of the local environment, make policies that focus on single issues and single inputs very difficult to implement because, by definition, they exclude the diverse conditions found at the classroom level. Educational reform has been found to be typically obstruction-oriented and directed towards "removing" or "fixing" the problem through short-term, crisis-oriented intervention. To be effective at the local level variability needs to be taken into account and reform needs to be on-going. Policy research calls for looking beyond the formal policy structure to promote and stimulate change. Studies suggest that effective policy strategies utilize locally existing networks, e.g., teacher/parent associations, as change vehicles rather than using policy delivery channels derived from a centralized decision-making structure. Furthermore, the policy-making process should be a cooperative effort between all levels involved (See McLaughlin, 1990, *The RAND Change Agent Study* Revisited, in *Educational Researcher*, Dec. 1990).

In addition to the policy-specific recommendations listed above, a series of more general recommendations are included at the end of this report. These recommendations will be further studied and refined during the remainder of the study. It is expected that with the full complement of data from all three study components, it will be possible to identify and monitor trends over time. Unfortunately, all available evidence to date leads to the disturbing prediction that, if the policies continue to be implemented as they currently stand, it is likely that there will be a significant number of students who will not graduate because these policies have not anticipated their varying situations.

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General Recommendations Based on Preliminary Findings

The following recommendations are sensitive to the overall direction of the Agency in promoting excellence and equity in education by shifting its emphasis from a regulatory role to one of partnership and instructional leadership with school districts. Current efforts at the state level (performance-based education, Partnership Schools Initiative, Middle School Initiative, High School Initiative, Targeted Technical Assistance Initiative, etc.) reflect a movement towards site-based decision making by increasing local control and fostering partnership efforts.

• State-level initiatives and policies should be grounded in a developmental framework and perspective that is sensitive to, and respectful of, the nature of adolescence. Responses to the needs of developing youth must stem from an integrated community effort involving business, health, social and other community service organizations.

• Develop a formal process whereby reform policies can be reconsidered periodically so that reform can become on-going. This change process should include representation from the state, districts, schools, students and parents.

• Continue to closely monitor the perceived differential impact of state-level policies on at-risk students versus regular students.

• Investigate the implications for policy formation aimed at single issues and single outputs, particularly since this study demonstrated variable interpretation and implementation of policy. This becomes even more important when considering the current movement towards site-based management. Successful implementation depends upon a clear understanding of the relationship between state-level policies and local-level policy interpretation and implementation.

• Because the impact of specific reforms may negatively affect schools with very high proportions of at-risk students, continue to develop the Targeted Technical Assistance Initiative now underway within the Agency. Another approach might be through the Partnership Schools Initiative (PSI), whereby staff in PSI schools could serve as consultants or facilitators to staff in non-PSI schools with large enrollments of students identified as at-risk.

• Integrated support services (counseling, health services, transportation, day care, tutorials, etc.) for at-risk students must be intensified and linked with an effort directed towards enhancing student and family well-being, as well as with an effort to comprehensively coordinate school-based support services with those taking place in the home and the community. While not an excuse for inaction, it is becoming apparent that schools may be hampered in their ability to increase academic achievement for a significant percentage of students without multiple non-educational services and unless all facets of the community and all levels of government cooperate and jointly assume responsibility for all youth. Thus, development of the Agency Strategic Plan and the inter-agency Coordinated Strategic Plan for the Health and Human Services Commission must continue to emphasize the need to serve all Texas youth in a manner that fosters equity and excellence in academic achievement.

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COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

TITLE VI, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; THE MODIFIED COURT ORDER, CIVIL ACTION 5281, FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT, EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS, TYLER DIVISION

Reviews of local education agencies pertaining to compliance with Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and with specific requirements of the Modified Court Order, Civil Action No. 5281, Federal District Court, Eastern District of Texas, Tyler Division are conducted periodically by staff representatives of the Texas Education Agency. These reviews cover at least the following policies and practices:

(1) acceptance policies on student transfers from other school districts;

(2) operation of school bus routes or runs on a non-segregated basis;

(3) nondiscrimination in extracurricular activities and the use of school facilities;

(4) nondiscriminatory practices in the hiring, assigning, promoting, paying, demoting, reassigning, or dismissing of faculty and staff members who work with children;

(5) enrollment and assignment of students without discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin;

(6) nondiscriminatory practices relating to the use of a student's first language; and

(7) evidence of published procedures for hearing complaints and grievances.

In addition to conducting reviews, the Texas Education Agency staff representatives check complaints of discrimination made by a citizen or citizens residing in a school district where it is alleged discriminatory practices have occurred or are occurring.

Where a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is found, the findings are reported to the Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education.

If there is a direct violation of the Court Order in Civil Action No. 5281 that cannot be cleared through negotiation, the sanctions required by the Court Order are applied.

TITLE VII, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964 AS AMENDED; EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11246 AND 11375; TITLE IX, EDUCATION AMENDMENTS; REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 AS AMENDED; 1974 AMENDMENTS TO THE WAGE-HOUR LAW EXPANDING THE AGE DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT ACT OF 1967; VIETNAM ERA VETERANS READJUSTMENT ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1972 AS AMENDED; AMERICAN DISABILITIES ACT OF 1990; AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1991.

The Texas Education Agency shall comply fully with the nondiscrimination provisions of all Federal and State laws and regulations by assuring that no person shall be excluded from consideration for recruitment, selection, appointment, training, promotion, retention, or any other personnel action, or be denied any benefits or participation in any educational programs or activities which it operates on the grounds of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, handicap, age, or veteran status or a disability requiring accommodation (except where age, sex, or handicap constitute a bona fide occupational qualification necessary to proper and efficient administration). The Texas Education Agency is an Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer.

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